SD Veterans Commission Meeting February 7-8, 2005 Ft. Pierre, South Dakota Holiday Inn Express

The Meeting of the SD Veterans Commission was called to order on February 7, 2005, at 1:00 by Chairman Gene Murphy. He then led the Pledge of Allegiance. There was a welcome and introductions were made followed by announcements.

D Loudner moved the agenda be approved as printed, seconded by P Evenson, motion carried. R

Benson moved the minutes be approved as printed, seconded by D Clarke, motion carried.

MG Mike Gorman was asked for his report on the Department and the South Dakota National Guard. For the Guard troops the update follows:

- January 22, 2005 the Spearfish firefighters were welcomed back.
- 247 members of the 2 Battalion, 147th FA Brigade (the 3 firing batteries) from Aberdeen, Sisseton, and Redfield are back in the United States, the rest of the ^{2nd} Battalion is still processing in Kuwait. The "Welcome Home" will be Saturday afternoon.
- The 153rd Engineer Battalion is all in Kuwait being processed.
- The 74 members of the 109th Engineer Group in Afghanistan will be there until May-1 year will be up at that time.
- 22 members have just begun their duty in Iraq in various locations and positions from medical to maintenance to intelligence.
- Iraqi Freedom has three phases. In Phase I there were about 2,100 troops mobilized, some deployed overseas, some stateside, others not deployed.
- Phase II approximately 900 troops were mobilized and most deployed overseas.
- Phase 111 22 members are deployed-the numbers are going the right way according to MG Gorman.
- For the Division of Veterans Affairs two staff members are enroute to Ft Sill on the demob team. There are other demob teams set and ready to travel when the next units are to arrive in the States at Ft Sill or Ft Carson. The goal is to reach the returnees before they are too caught up in return activities at home. There are also family support meetings/briefings ongoing.
- There are 17 Veterans Forums scheduled in conjunction with the American Legion in FY2005-roughly half have been accomplished with the others to be held before the end of March.
- There is an increased work load due in part to the returning/new veterans.
- The Veterans Bonus by February 1, 2005, had been paid to 2,067. Over \$892,000 has been paid out; the average bonus payment has been \$432.
- Legislation that pertains to the Department includes amending a statute to include an honorary diploma for Vietnam Veterans and re-opening the Veterans Bonus for the Gulf War period for any who didn't apply during the previous window.

? Under national legislation emphasis in the President's Budget include adding co-payments on visits and drugs for certain categories of veterans; an increase of the military death benefits; and an increase in Servicemen's Life Insurance.

Earl Schultz had a report from VETS (US DOL), specifically presenting fact sheets about USERRA. There have been calls from employers working to manage the returnees correctly as well as from veterans. He commented that the cooperation and assistance from the SD National Guard, specifically LTC Marshall Michels and LTC Reid Christopherson, have been exceptional. They work with the Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve (ESGR) and they have worked together and handled referrals very professionally. There is a poster through his office regarding military service (non-career military rights and employer responsibilities.)

Schultz also mentioned that the Unemployment Insurance for the displaced employee who is let go to reinstate the returning guardsperson/veteran is now being funded by the State so the employer is not "penalized" by having to pay the unemployment for these persons. There have been questions regarding "veteran's preference" but many are problems with rehire versus reinstatement, lack of understanding of the law.

Todd Kolden was not able to attend due to illness. Todd is with the SD Department of Labor, employment services. Through his office there is also a poster for employers to display that "We hire veterans first."

B Locken moved that a letter be written thanking LTC Michels and LTC Christopherson for their extra efforts on behalf of newly returned veterans and the employers, too. Evenson seconded. Chairman Murphy asked Earl Schultz to draft response and forward to Director Foell to finalize and make distribution.

Question about SMOCTA-it was in effect after Vietnam and after the Gulf War, but nothing has been passed for it at this point for the present conflict.

Gene Murphy made a presentation of "History's Heroes." It is a numbered and signed, matted and framed print by Ray Kelly presented to MG Michael Gorman and Dennis Foell for the Soldiers & Sailors War Memorial Building. It was given by the South Dakota Department and Arthur H Muchow Chapter No. 1 of the DAV. There are a limited number of them and the sales of the prints go to the transportation fund.

Wayne Vetter, President of the Association of C/TVSO's told of the proposal to increase the C/TVSO salary supplement. They are going to do further study and education of the Association members on the content so there is understanding of and support for the increase. This is an increase from the State, not the counties. He also commented that the Veterans Forums are going well and they are also excellent help for the C/TVSO's for outreach, information, and assistance. Mr. Vetter also felt that working with the VA (CBOC) Clinics to get pictures and contact info posted on the Service Officers in the respective areas was beneficial. On behalf of the Association a thank you to Dennis and DVA is extended for all the efforts on behalf of veterans and for the assistance to the service officers.

Peter Henry was then asked for the report on the VA Black Hills Health Care System. He first shared that a new Associate Director had been hired that day, Steve DiStasio, who has an extraordinary military health care background. Please see the handout for Mr. Henry's report. He addressed questions pertaining to the travel restrictions for beneficiary travel. This took effect only 1 February 2005, so the effect of this remains to be seen. It was however written into the policy that the Chief of Staff can designate it as medical necessity.

Joe Dalpiaz had a report from the Sioux Falls VA Medical Center. Please see the handout for the report. He did introduce Gary Million, the new Associate Director for the VAMC.

Rob McDivitt had the report from VISN 23. Please see the handout. He talked about the new Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Jim Nicholson, who is originally from Northern Iowa. He is a West Point Graduate, Vietnam Veteran, lawyer, previous representative to the Vatican among other things. R McDivitt said the FY04 budget is finished. The FY06 budget talks of increases for pharmacy and copays, caps included. In discussion about the CBOC's from the CARES plan, there were 7 determined, but with the current budget these may not happen. He did say that Mental Health Readiness for these returning veterans is a focus point. There is a mental health addition to CBOC's. Question on budget shortfalls was raised, with no clear answer. CARES also has enhanced services, i.e. Spinal Cord Injury Clinic in Minnesota; a new VA Nursing Home in Des Moines, IA; Ambulatory Care addition in Minnesota; Veteran Rural Health CBOC in FY05 budget. Larry Wilcox, SD Veterans' Home, asked if there was any discussion or plan to increase per diem rates for private nursing home care. McDivitt knew of none. There is a pilot program in Washington for assisted living under the VA.

Gaylyn Reiners represented John Smith, director of the VA Dakotas Regional Office. (See handout.) He said the plan is to handle the claims due to discharge for injuries, etc. for OEF and OIF personnel within 30 days. There is a good relationship with the Guard and their cooperation and assistance is exceptional.

Some statistics:

11,300 veterans drawing benefits now
The average is \$740 per month.
750 widows and children
940 getting \$1,050 per month
\$250 per month for widows drawing death benefit on spouse

Severely injured veterans are identified from several sources, i.e. Bethesda Hospital, etc. One staff member will be in charge of these injured personnel so they are identified, and then streamlined for classification and processing.

There is no authority to fill vacancies of which there are 4 in Regional Office.

Senator John Thune's Office was represented by Ben Ready. He reported that Senator Thune had just returned from Iraq. He found that morale was good, equipment was adequate but there was still room for improvement. There is still a job that needs to be done, so he is not pushing for an end-date. A great emphasis is to get the Iraqi soldiers and police trained. Thune is aware

that mental health will be a big issue for returning troops. Funding is going to be the turning point for the increased surviving spouse pension benefit and the increased death benefits. He is in lock-step with DVA regarding 1. Concurrent Receipt and 2. Mandatory Funding for VA Health Care-the returning veteran is #1, they are volunteers who have served and they must be cared for.

Thune's Office numbers are 605-334-9596 in Sioux Falls and 202-224-2321 in Washington, DC.

Representing Stephanie Herseth's Office is Ira Taken Alive from the Rapid City Office. He is the West River Director working with agriculture, and veteran issues among others. Congresswoman Herseth is supporting better funding for the VA and has signed onto other bills for funding of veteran-related issues. She is on the Veterans Affairs Committee, on Veterans Panel. Concern that increases in budget will be the basis for an increase-is it really more dollars or just more money from veteran's dollars (copayment increases, prescription increases).

Mike Rothenbuehler had no report from the PVA. The meeting was recessed at 5:05 PM until 8:00 AM Tuesday morning.

The meeting was reconvened at 8:00 AM by Chairman Gene Murphy who led the Pledge of Allegiance. Cheryl Stahlecker was introduced and invited to address the group. She brought greetings from the State VFW. She wanted to make everyone aware that next year (June, 2006) will be the VFW 75th Anniversary celebration in Pierre. They have a 75th Anniversary coin that is for sale, too. There will be work also over the year to recognize the Vietnam Veterans. The Auxiliary President, Nancy Fickbohm also brought greetings to the Commission. They are doing a membership push along with working with the returning veterans and families with the transition, as well as their hospital visits. They were hosting the Voice of Democracy State Finals this day.

Gary Johnson was then invited to speak. He is Team Leader at the Vet Center in Rapid City. Mental Health looks at war trauma transition -this is their job at the storefront. They work to help persons deal with emotions, feelings, defense mechanisms, etc. of those returning from war situation or their families. There was a handout about the work of the Vet Centers. The Vet Center, too, has a very good relationship with Ft Meade and this is one of many resources networked together like the Homeless Coalition, the Transition Assistance Program at Ellsworth (a wide-ranging help/support for someone transitioning back to civilian life), the Disabled Transition Assistance Program (DTAP); and Family Assistance Programs (Guard).

Larry Wilcox, Superintendent of the SD Veterans' Home spoke next. He had a handout but in addition mentioned that the FY06 Budget includes an increase of 7 in nursing staff due to added duties, i.e. IV's as mandated by the VA. He also wanted to tell of the marvelous dedication of the whole staff to care for the residents, in particular the Special Care or Nursing Care units. They are willing and available to get the residents from the several units to special activities and care for them so they can enjoy them as well. Randy Meyer was pointed out especially for all the overtime and true dedication he is providing.

For the facility itself there is a 5-Year planning program in the works. He did mention that the Chapel was not granted funding; it was not a high enough priority. Building #2 renovation is "on hold" pending the 5-year upgrade plan. Discussion about an East River Veterans' Home provided information that SD Veterans' Home would be required to give up whatever number of beds if an east river facility is constructed, because South Dakota is capped at 188 beds in total, no matter how many facilities. D Loudner suggested that MG Gorman tour the former Training School facility as one possible location. Wilcox felt that Sioux Falls was a more viable choice because of the proximity of the VA Medical Center which in Hot Springs is a real boon to the SD Veterans' Home.

Dave Wherry from the SD DVA Claims Office reported on their operations in Sioux Falls. (See handout.) Of the 100 new claims added each month the greatest percentage is from Iraqi Freedom veterans, but all other era veterans are also being added.

Larry Person, Field Officer Operations reported on the Veterans Forums and the demob meetings that are in progress. The annual Benefits School will be held August 29 - September 1, 2005, at the Ramkota in Pierre. There are five new VSO's on the county level and there will be an orientation set up soon for these persons. Among the network, the people working with the veterans or dependents are also trying to determine if there is eligibility for other areas of the benefits program.

Discussion was that many CVSO's are also wearing other hats in County Government-i.e. Welfare Officer, Emergency Management. On the other hand some of the VSO's are holding that same position in more than one county which can be a real plus in that quality work is more possible. The County Commissions should be made aware that the federal dollars brought in to a county through the VSO's and the benefits paid to veterans are very significant and when they are trying to hold down county expenses, this might not be the area to cut or compromise. It is simple economics.

George Summerside had a report on Veterans Education. There are presently 57 schools approved and active. (Thanks to the C/TVSO's for assistance with school approvals.) 118 Training Establishments are approved with 13 pending. The average payment is \$1,600 - \$1,700, with perhaps \$7.7 million for vocational rehabilitation and Education. The VA contract is fully funded for this year and next.

The education personnel have an aggressive approach to OJT and Apprenticeship programs. They have done a lot of outreach (National Guard, law enforcement, State Government among others) to make persons aware of and interest in the education options in veterans benefits. Also under outreach, are the "Welcome Home" booklets, the Quik Reference series sent to the C/TVSO's, and the OJT and School Brochures which have been updated. There are some good school contact resource people available in the VA and the ELR is gaining in experience. The workload for the SD SAA is manageable, but when the VA responsible questions come in, they take a great deal of time.

A question was raised about the location of approved schools and OJT training establishments which are located across the state and on the several reservations

A personal note about George was shared with the body; he is headed for the Marshall Islands for the christening of the PVT Anderson, named after his uncle, a KIA of World War II on the Kwajalein Atoll. The date of the christening is February 21, 2005.

The Veterans Bonus program report is on the handout. D Foell is hoping that the legislation will soon be up to open the last bonus to persons who were late in filing for it. That would open the Persian Gulf I Bonus August 2, 1990 through December 31, 1992. North Dakota is presently looking at a Veterans Bonus. It is a maximum of \$900 if activated stateside, \$1,800 if in hostile area overseas, and \$2,500 if a Purple Heart recipient or KIA. They have a veteran's trust fund and there is the possibility that they might pay the difference to those who served with South Dakota units, or they may not pay a non-ND resident.

The Purple Heart Memorial will be rededicated on August 7, 2005 which is a Sunday and National Purple Heart Day. There will be a general invitation extended and publicity but sending individual invitations is not an option because there is no list of Purple Heart recipients.

The Demob and Family Support Meetings are on-going. There are seven individuals at Ft Sill for demob with the returning 3 batteries of the 2/147 th FA Brigade. SD was the first State to do these demob teams to meet returning units but Wisconsin has begun sending demob teams now. Helen Van Laecken and Larry Person will each head up six and 7 person demob teams for the 2nd and 3rd groups returning. This endeavor is taking attention nation wide and is very successful.

For the Veterans Forums, there have been between 40 and 50 in attendance and always at least one claim has been taken. In July, 2005, all veteran organizations will meet July 21St in conjunction with the July Veteran Commission Meeting on the 20th. All of the meetings will be held at the Sheraton in Sioux Falls. Reservations can be made through Dennis and he'll send out a note about the reservations.

D Foell had a handout about the budget. (See handout.) Due to vacancies in the Finance Office many expenditures are in pending status, therefore remaining budget balances may be higher due to the pending status. The new finance person will be coming in Wednesday, February 9th

Discussion about license plates followed. The information that has been received by the Division will be sent out to each Commissioner. Each one needs to develop thoughts on a veteran's plate for discussion and planning for the April Commission Meeting. D Foell will be sure that Deb Hilmer is available to answer questions about license plates at one of the next meetings. Some questions now are: Is legislation required? What rules or options are there in designing a plate? What is a deadline for submitting plate designs? Bill Locken envisioned a distinctive Veteran Plate and with no money generated as a fund raiser.

For the Emergency Loan Report Dennis reported that the Office of Risk Management-State Collections no longer exists. New policies are in place that need to be examined.

The American Legion Training taking place this month in Washington, D.C. will be attended by Mike Holzhauser and Steve Oliva from the DVA Office in Pierre. Thank you to the American Legion for providing these slots for the SD DVA.

Gene Schumacher, State Commander for the American Legion, had greetings for the Commission and good reports of the Veterans Forums and the "teamwork and working together" that is his motto. All entities are cooperating and working together from the VA hospitals to the Division, to the C/TVSO's, and the SD Department of the American Legion. He listed the dates for the Veterans Forums and also commended Warren Aas for setting up the PowerPoint used:

March 31 in Lennox; February 19 in Brookings (in the afternoon); March 15 in Redfield; March 24 in Sisseton; March 21 in Winner; March 22 in Pine Ridge; March 28 in Onida; March 29 in Hayes; February 15 in Piedmont.

The local posts have been involved with the Family Support Groups. Cdr Schumacher also wanted to share praise with the VA Hospital personnel. The VA facilities in South Dakota had been toured by national American Legion personnel and they were amazed at the distances in MILES between facilities, but for all facilities nothing but great praise and compliments for the institutions.

Susie Clyde, State President of ALA shared that her organization could write letters and make phone calls to the Congressional Delegates. She was also very pleased to announce that there was renewed life at the Veterans Home with Larry Wilcox in the Superintendent's position.

Gene Murphy representing the DAV mentioned that South Dakota is again leading in membership, in the category that they won last year. Their State Convention is May 12-14, 2005 at the Deadwood Gulch in the Hills. The national meeting is March 6-9 in Washington, D.C. They have purchased three new vans for Huron, Ft Thompson/Lower Brule, and Mitchell. He pointed several articles in the DAV Bulletin.

He also pointed out the insert from the PVA who will be sponsoring their Walleye Tournament, a Bass Tournament, and an ADA Seminar, a Chapter picnic and they have 2 hunting blinds available for people to use-they are mounted on trailers, and wheel chair accessible. They also help sponsor the Disability Day. Platte will again have the hunting outing with persons brought in from ten States.

Question about telemarketing-there have been calls made on behalf of VFW and PVA and the Disabled Veterans Association which is based in Ohio-the telemarketing done for the latter produces negligible funds for veterans.

The upcoming meeting will be in Rapid City at TREA, 12-13 April. The next meeting is 20-21 July in Sioux Falls.

The floor was opened for questions and comments from the Veterans Commission. P Evenson felt questions needed to be answered and a study done for the possibility and feasibility of an East River Veterans' Home. Evenson has some information on funding for facilities and will have it at the next meeting.

B Locken questioned if there might be other restrictions out there regarding a second Veterans' Home. He felt that any options for expansion East River should be included in the 5-year plan being developed at the Veterans' Home in Hot Springs.

D Loudner felt that the Veterans Commission should be included in the Veterans' Home 5-year planning group. He also felt that Buffalo County Commission and the people needed to be provided a meeting there to promote the bonus program.

Jerry Lolley said in defense of the C/TVSO's, the demob teams and bonus program that these returning veterans and families were briefed like all the rest, but they must file for the bonus themselves.

The meeting was adjourned at 11:40 by Chairman Murphy.

Director

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Date

Attendees for SD Veterans Commission Meeting, February 7-8, 2005 in Ft Pierre at the Holiday Inn Express

Director, SDDVA

Chairman, Veterans Commission Veterans Commissioner Secretary, DMVA Veterans Commissioner

A Murphy Don Veterans Commissioner Veterans
Loudner Mike Gorman Commissioner Veterans Commissioner

Bill Locken Paul Field Supervisor SDDVA

Evenson Roland Superintendent, SD Veterans' Home

Benson Don Clarke DMVA

Dennis G. Foell Gene

Larry Person Larry Meade County VSO

Wilcox Andy Gerlach Representative, Congresswoman Herseth's Office (394-5280)

Jerry Lolley Ira Taken VFW

Alive Richard Steams
Hal Weber Cheryl
Former SD Veterans Commissioner, Rapid City
State Commander, VFW State President, VFW

Stahlecker Nancy Auxiliary SAA, SD DVA

Fickbohm George VETS, US DOL

Summerside Earl R. Visitor, American Legion

Schultz Gunner President, SD Association of C/TVSO's
Bastrup Wayne Vetter State Commander, American Legion Team

Gene Schumacher

Gary Johnson Dave

Leader, VET Center, Rapid City

Supervisor, SD DVA Claims Office

Wherry State President, American Legion Auxiliary

Laura "Susie" Clyde Chapter 18, DAV

Bob Voeltz Phil Post #311, American Legion Andrison Mike PVA, Sioux Falls VARO,

Rothenbuehler Gaylyn Sioux Falls

Reiners Joe Dalpiaz Director, VAMC, Sioux Falls

Gary Million Glenn Associate Director, VAMC, Sioux Falls

Green Ben Ready Rob Visitor, Pierre

McDivitt Roy Boyd Representative, Senator Thune's Office

Peter Henry VISN 23

State Adjutant, American Legion

Director, Black Hills VA Health Care System